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ABSTRACT

Citing increased attention now focused on networking in organizational contexts, this paper addresses two networking questions related to an organization's strategic purpose: how the organization's formal and informal networking channels are connected, and how they are managed and maintained. Thought processing is defined as a networking system that not only provides a written verbatim log, but a means whereby ideas may be exchanged, clarified, debated, and resolved. Ways in which thought processing can facilitate networking are examined in the context of the relationship between decision-making and the networking system; the development of information-decision systems to provide the proper flow of information among decision points in an organization; the importance of both formal and informal communication; an in-depth analysis of thought patterns to determine natural patterns for the information-decision system; and the increased effectiveness of organizations implementing thought processing. (THC)

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CROSS INFORMATION COMPANY

BUILDING IDEA NETWORKS

CORPORATE MANAGEMENT WITH THOUGHT PROCESSING

INTRODUCTION

Networking has received more and more attention in organizational contexts of late. Management has long been concerned with "getting its message across" to workers, that is, networking throughout the organization. Frequently, management is concerned with a lack of effectiveness in the communication process, and may not be entirely familiar with semantic problems of the networking 'medium' involved. In other cases, administrators are concerned with upward and downward communications, soliciting attitudes and feelings of lower echelons, and encouraging their networking upward through the hierarchical structure. When only 20% of those messages sent by top management are understood at the bottom, inumerable problems arise. Thought processing is a networking system that not only provides a written verbatim log, but a means whereby ideas may be exchanged, clarified, debated, and resolved.

Organizational structure is definitely tied to networking systems. This relationship is apparent when formal structures, channels, and media are involved. For informal alignments and irregular information flow, the relationship is less evident. Networking does not necessarily follow stated organizational arrangements, or vice versa. Numerous overlaps and gaps are apparent in most organizations, causing further problems.

Networking and control are decisive processes. Networking makes organizations work and cohere; control regulates behavior. If we map pathways by which ideas are communicated between different parts of an organization, and by which they are applied to behaviors of that organization in relationship to the outside world, we will have gone far toward understanding that organization. Networking offers the road toward this understanding.

ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKING

Generally speaking, the networking concept provides a means for study and management. Instead of concentrating solely on an organization's strategic purpose, two questions will be focused on: 1) How are an organization's formal and informal networking channels connected? and 2) How are these managed and maintained? For our interests, how can thought processing facilitate networking?

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Answers to these questions bring to light the most important concept in organizational development - personal organizational structure following the development of networking systems, rather than vice versa. For many organizations, networking systems have been designed to follow organizational lines without recognizing the fact that this may not provide optimal flows of information for decision making.

Problems in networking systems for decison-making have resulted from changes in organizational relationships in recent years. Companies have been faced with dynamic world conditions, rapidly changing technology, intense competition, and changing markets. In some instances, re-organization resulting from these changes has caused further reductions in networking activities. These phenomena require new forms of networking. Unfortunately, many times management loses sight of the seemingly obvious and simple relationship between organizational structure and networking needs. Having been given more responsibilities and decision-making authority, they may not be receiving all the information required. But, too many companies do not follow up re-organization with penetrating re-appraisals of their information system needs.

Granting organizational structure and networking systems are inextricably intertwined, the problem remains. Which comes first? It becomes increasingly significant to know this, as one attempts to either design an organization or manage one.

DECISION MAKING

The relationship between decision-making and the networking system is extremely important. Decision-making and networking processes are so interdependent they become, in many cases, inseparable. In managing a corporation, we see many approaches to the study of organizational decision-making: (1) the traditional view, characterized by emphasis on some logical arrangement for dividing work, hierarchical structure, and specialization; (2) the human relations view, developing the concept of cooperative relationships, participation and informal organization; (3) the professional view, stressing roles of knowledge, creativity, and innovation; (4) the decision-making view, focusing on the study of an organization as a decision-making unit; and (5) the systems view, the integration of subsystems into an operational whole.

The decison-making system (or organization) includes information, objectives, strategies, alternatives, probabilities, and consequences. The function of the organization is to facilitate the flow of ideas for the making of appropriate decisions. In this view, the networking system

appears paramount, the organization structured around it as a frame of reference. In turn, the networking system is considered primarily a supplier of ideas for decisions. But how does information get from pure data into useful information upon which a decison can be made?

DATA IS NOT EUOUGH INFORMATION

A manager may require or desire any of an organization's data in order to help her/him make a decision or deal with a situation. It follows, that when a decision is to be made concerning the development of a new product, or location of a new plant, a manager will require data on land and labor costs for each of the locations or products under consideration.

So, too, when a manager is faced with a 'simple' situation, such as welcoming a visiting guest; data concerning the guest's background and interests is necessary to facilitate an appropriate visit. The essence of information - as opposed to data - is that information has been evaluated by people for use in a particular situation or class of situations. It has been 'humanized.'

Numbers representing records of a product's past monthly sales in various markets, are data. If it is determined that these numbers are to be used for forecasting future sales, then to serve as the basis for production scheduling, "THE DATA BECOMES INFORMATION," having been evaluated in terms of utility in a management decision situation.

Thought processing lends itself well to computer use for manipulating ideas into reports and thus, decisions. TP is the management "power tool" for coordinating, developing, and utilizing information in a strategic manner.

ONLINE IDEA EXCHANGE

Since the thought processing system is organized around networking, and thought organizing is designed to fit within an organizational structure, the concept of the 'idea exchange' emerges. Although final decisions are not always made within the idea exchange (it is definitely possible), supporting evidence for a decision was created there. Moreover, the exchange is managed by idea leaders to prevent information from piling up. Here, ideas can be revised, outlined, charted, and edited.

Structurally, administration can be viewed as a configuration of thought patterns relating individuals and collectives of varying sizes, shapes, and degress of understanding, cohesion, and stability. Dynamically, administration appears as a patterned swirl and flow of ideas. Many of them channel through transactional circuits between persons and persons, persons and groups, and groups and other groups.

For our purposes, concepts of communication patterns and flows are particularly important. Patterns relate communication to organization, and flow concepts relate to decision making. Thus the several concepts - networking, thought processing, and decision making are inexorably interwoven.

Thought processing can be used for organizing management staff. However, bringing a group of business analysts together and designating them a business management team does not necessarily make them a cohesive, productive unit.

With thought processing, this team can participate in a way far easier than with any other system. It allows each person to participate 'at once.' Everyone 'has the floor' at the same time, everyone from next door to the other side of the world, because, with TP systems, 'you are there' online. TP systems have the capacity to allow many people to work on the same conference or discussion simultaneously. It also enables those 'on the road' to access the system remotely.

Where it is difficult to measure work output of 'information workers,' TP provides a record, filing, outlining, charting, and tracking, system as well as a personal notepad area for private use. For the first time, we may begin to really track the progress of a project from inception to completion allowing management, new staff, or observers to participate at any point along the way.

In managing business it is important to solicit input from others in the department or company -- TP allows people who may not have direct responsibility or job-related activities to participate. Thought processing facilitates and encourages input by others. These 'observers' may review the discussion and add their own comments.

The name of each person who develops a position or an idea is added to the idea exchange. Each person, additionally, has full opportunity to present positions, raise issues, and even fillibuster without being supressed by the group. Correspondingly, shy or inhibited persons may participate without being worried by 'bullies' or by the 'Hollywood syndrome.'

Ideas can be networked from one person to another, increasing involvement and participation, without dominating or detracting from the foreward movement of the idea exchange. Personal friendships may be developed between colleagues over long distances without the limitations of 'telephone-tag.'

Neither rain, nor sleet, nor sickness, nor distance, nor time, will restrict participation in a meeting. Travel and other meetings are typical causes of delays in scheduling. Such conflicts can disrupt the timely impact of a meeting's purpose for weeks, but the TP system insures everyone will 'always be on time'. With networking, a meeting is not dependent on any one person's time schedule, since it makes use of 'unreal time'. *(Is this how one describes not-real time?)

The length of a meeting is controlled and facilitated by the conference manager who may be located in another city, but even if the manager is down the hall, networking keeps people in touch. Assignments can be given, people may respond, argue, or discuss work without having to physically attend the meeting. Considering other forms of tele/conferencing the cost of thought processing is by far the cheapest.

Most groups exist to perform tasks. In meetings, the task involves information gathering, discussion, problem solving, implementing decisions, and evaluating the outcome of a group's work. Many of these functions require other people for support such as secretaries, researchers, and writers. In addition, much of the overhead is concentrated on 'getting coffee' rather than the task at hand. TP systems provide an organized structure facilitating major activities such as, initiating information seeking, information giving, opinion giving, elaborating, coordinating, evaluating, and energizing. In this way, the group 'gets down to business' and does not spend wasteful, expensive time on consumate overhead.

TP permits people to concentrate on an issue's substance, rather than on organization. How many times has the same problem been confronted over and over? Multiply this by those of close working colleagues, and by those of other people in other departments, other divisions, other corporations, ad infinitum, the result is the wheel gets continually reinvented but the problem remains unsolved. The adage, "My problems are your problems," actually means most of our time is spent attacking the same problem, over and over again without making headway so that, when the problem re-occurs, we tend to re-solve it rather than make use of the solution.

It is an important aspect of business management to document work. How many times have you received minutes from a meeting, or really know the status of a project? And, if/when you do get the minutes, how often do they actually convey what took place at the meeting? TP provides a verbatim transcript. Each person's comments are in their own words, not just a secretary's notes. There is no "body language" to interpret. TP structures a meeting in such a way that purpose and content are not lost.

In a system like MTX - MATRIX system, there is a meeting 'status' indicator informing each person where the meeting is and what has occurred. At any point in the meeting, everything transpired may be reviewed. In addition, one may go back to the first meeting or to any one in between for reference.

TP allows a participant to read a speaker's remarks without having to respond immediately. Consequently, it is not easy for someone to undermine or 'sabotage' a speaker. A friendly rather than confrontational atmosphere is thus created. Notes may be made, questions raised, and comments added without distractions. This allows a speaker to respond to a question when s/he is prepared and chooses to do so.

If 'the camel was a horse designed by a committee,'then not much can be said of committees. Everyone at some point has been frustrated by 'Moscow delegates' -- conference participants who cannot vote without first going back to check with the boss. How many times have you attended a meeting with a colleague afterwards discovering you have totally different impressions of what took place? A great deal of meeting time is spent clarifying confusion. The verbatim TP transcript helps solve this problem while allowing for electronic mail to seek clarification on the most confusing statements.

TP assists members in a way that is rarely, if ever, found in a meeting, i.e., private conferences. Private notes and discussions may occur during the conference to determine interests and positions of other people before an issue is brought before the group, 'testing the waters'.

Consensus building is one of the most difficult and most challenging goals of meetings. A commitment to putting decisions into action with a true 'meeting of the minds' is far easier to bring about through thought processing. TP allows members to work privately, without formality or scheduling requirements, or to pair-off for work on various sub-issues of a problem. The result is vastly improved productivity, and in many cases, monetary savings aren't as important as these improvements.

TP facilitates candid discussion which, in turn, means people pay more attention. A higher quality of discussion and time for thorough thinking are the results. Communication and morale are improved because employees can talk with supervisors on an equal basis. When workers come up with an idea, it is attributed to that worker, not a superior who takes credit unduly. The commitment to 'making it work' is therefore greater.

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, the transmission of ideas has been a key to progress. Efficient networking is important to all fields of human endeavor. However, as society becomes more complex, as technology increases at an accelerating rate, and in spite of improvements in networking media, it is becoming more and more difficult to network effectively. The growth of organizations, together with increased specialization and functionalization have developed barriers to networking in many spheres of activity. Scientists and researchers find it more and more difficult to communicate on a broad scope. Managers of business and industrial organizations find that networking and understanding are increasing problems in day-to-day operations.

Information-decision systems can be developed to provide the proper flow of information among decision points in an organization. Both formal and informal communication must be recognized. Management might well analyze thought patterns in detail because the information-decision system may follow 'natural' patterns or systems, even though these are not recognized in a formal organizational structure.

TP enables a great many people to participate in networking and idea exchanges. It provides opportunities for managers to meet effectively, with time for thorough 'thought' in their decision-making process. Thought processing is the new management "power tool" for building idea networks.